

## SHAKESPEARE THE ELIZABETHAN

by *Virgil K. Whitaker*

Of William Shakespeare, his contemporary Ben Jonson wrote that he was "not of an age, but for all time." Some three hundred fifty years later few will dispute this dictum. But Shakespeare scholars often act as though they also believed what Jonson came close to saying but surely did not mean (for he also called Shakespeare "Soul of the age")—namely, that Shakespeare was not of his own age. At least, they often interpret and criticize his plays, and especially his tragedies, in isolation from the drama of his age. In excellence of design his best tragedies do indeed conform to the desires and the dicta of writers from Aristotle to our own times who have philosophized about tragedy as a dramatic genre; the tragedies of his dramatic maturity are, indeed, a prime source of modern theory. But too often we attempt to square all the later tragedies with our ideas of great tragedy, and we therefore look for what may not be in them.

This paper will argue, to the contrary, that Shakespeare was often of his own time, even in his greatest plays. It will therefore be an essay in literary iconoclasm, and it will propose three theses about Elizabethan tragedy in general and about Shakespearean tragedy in particular. If these theses be granted, it will follow that major critical concerns about Shakespeare result from our expecting of him what we have no right to demand of an Elizabethan playwright—which Shakespeare indubitably was. We should read the plays as they are and not worry about critical problems of our own—or Aristotle's—contriving. For we have no right, first of all, to expect an Elizabethan, or even a Shakespearean, tragedy to have a clearly articulated plot structure; it may only tell a well-known story. Second, even if a tragedy has a unified plot, we dare not assume that such unity results from concentration upon a single tragic hero. Third, granted a single tragic hero, we still have no right to demand in this hero a definite tragic flaw or error. Each of these propositions will first be established for Elizabethan tragedy as a whole and then applied, respectively, to *Antony and Cleopatra*, *Julius Caesar*, and *Hamlet*.<sup>1</sup>

Examining the writers upon drama known to Shakespeare's contemporaries, from Horace and Donatus to Sir Philip Sidney, would lead us to expect that Elizabethan tragedy would have the following characteristics: It should be based upon history and be concerned with great personages, it should

narrate a sequence of events ending in death, and it should provide moral exempla or at least try to draw moral lessons from the events narrated. Only Sidney mentions the unities, and it is significant that he, like the Italians, is concerned primarily with unity of time and place and has no real understanding of unity of action, the only one that is fundamental and is really stressed by Aristotle. As to dramatic structure, Thomas Heywood, in his *Apology for Actors* (ca. 1608, published 1612), paraphrases the standard four parts of a play derived from Donatus, who was actually writing of comedy: ". . . the *Prologue*, that is, the preface; the *Protasis*, that is, the proposition, which includes the first Act, and presents the Actors; the *Epitasis*, which is the busnesse and body of the Comedy; the last, the *Catastrophe*, and conclusion."<sup>2</sup> As to dramatic action and the tragic hero we encounter only silence.

An examination of extant Elizabethan tragedies written for the popular stage shows, furthermore, that the practice of playwrights squared with the consensus of critics known to them. All this I have argued at length elsewhere.<sup>3</sup> What follows will concentrate upon dramatic structure.

Almost all of the popular tragedies written during Shakespeare's productive career were based upon history or what was regarded as such. Sometimes, as in Kyd's *Solyman and Perseda* or *The Death of Robert Duke of Huntingdon*, a historical character is the center of romance material; sometimes, as in *Romeo and Juliet* or *Othello*, the ultimate source is an Italian tale that may have been regarded as historical in basis. But the plays mentioned are exceptional. The norm is considerable fidelity to historical material.

As a consequence of their historical source material, these plays frequently present not a tragic action but simply a tragic story; and a framework of episodes having some relationship of cause and effect that leads to the death of important characters may support various episodes or even subordinate narratives, sometimes with very little relationship to the main theme. Often the framework itself is simply a unit of history or an attempt to tie up all threads in a romantic story. All this should surprise no one who has watched the evolution of the motion picture, which has been very much like Elizabethan drama not only in its prolific development and its tendency to imitate popular successes but also in its use of all kinds of literary materials as source narratives.

Since two of the Shakespearean tragedies to be considered are based upon Plutarch's Roman lives, it will be instructive to see how Shakespeare's contemporaries handled Roman history as material for tragedies. Among his predecessors, Thomas Lodge, in his *The Wounds of Civill War* (performed ca. 1588, published 1594), presented "the true Tragedies of Marius and Scilla," but the civil war itself provided such structure as the play possesses. Late in Shakespeare's career, Thomas Heywood's *The Rape of Lucrece* (ca. 1607) narrates the careers of the Tarquins until Brutus kills the son. We also get Horatius at the bridge and "severall Songs in their apt places, by Valerius, the merrie Lord amongst the Roman Peeres." Ben Jonson follows the same

pattern. *Catiline his Conspiracy* (1611) narrates the full course of the conspiracy, with due attention to Cicero, and fails as drama partly because of Jonson's pedantic devotion to his sources and partly because he makes no real attempt to construct a tragic action centering in Catiline. George Chapman's *The Warres of Pompey and Caesar* (ca. 1613, published 1631), subsequently entitled *Caesar and Pompey: A Roman Tragedy, declaring their Warres* (published 1631), covers events from the initial rivalry between Pompey and Caesar to the murder of Pompey (at Lesbos) and the suicide of Cato.

The reader may object that centering upon Roman plays has led to a consideration of second-rate drama. But Chapman and Jonson are certainly not second-rate as dramatists, and the same failure of dramatic structure due to preoccupation with full narration of source material can be illustrated from very powerful plays, for example John Webster's *The White Divil, Or The Tragedy of Paolo Giordano Ursini, Duke of Brachiano, With the Life and Death of Vittoria Corombona the famous Venetian Curtizan* (published 1612), which also includes the death of Vittoria's brothers and the final arrest and punishment of Count Lodovico.

In its combination of poetic power and dramatic confusion, *The White Divil* is, in fact, somewhat like Shakespeare's *Antony and Cleopatra* (ca. 1607, published 1623), to which it can form an introduction. There can be no question that *Antony and Cleopatra* tells a famous love story from history; there is very real question whether it possesses clarity of tragic action, critical economia to the contrary notwithstanding.

The best clue to Shakespeare's interest is Octavius Caesar's closing summary speech, which merits comparison with similar speeches at the end of his earlier tragedies. Brutus was "the noblest Roman of them all," Othello "loved not wisely but too well," Malcolm pronounced judgment on "the dead butcher and his fiend-like queen" and promised to restore order and divine grace to Scotland. But Octavius Caesar stresses simply the fame of Antony and Cleopatra as lovers and their pitiful story. There is not a word of interpretation or of moral judgment. There is some clumsiness in making Octavius express an estimate of his glory that would be less immodest coming directly from Shakespeare, but presumably it is intended to characterize the pitiful story, not Octavius. There is, however, no mistaking the thrust of the important lines:

She shall be buried by her Antony.  
No grave upon the earth shall clip in it  
A pair so famous: high events as these  
Strike those that make them: and their story is  
No less in pity than his glory which  
Brought them to be lamented. Our army shall  
In solemn show attend this funeral,  
And then to Rome. Come, Dolabella, see  
High order in this great solemnity. (V.ii.356-364)

Shakespeare gives us no clue to any interpretation or purpose that has governed his telling of the famous story. He neither repeats the adverse judgments of Enobarbus nor implies that for such love the world was well lost. The story itself is what matters.

But the story itself, as Shakespeare tells it, is loaded with irrelevant detail if it is the tragedy of Antony and Cleopatra rather than a dramatization of Plutarch's narrative; it is also confused in the telling.

Within the play the most obvious indication of Shakespeare's interest in the story for its own sake is a tendency to pursue side issues. The scene in Pompey's galley (II.vii) perhaps helps to characterize the triumvirs and the world in which they operate, and a director can prepare for what is to come by showing Octavius coolly standing apart from the others. Menas's proposal that he cut the cable and carry off the guests, since it is rejected, has nothing to do with the conflict between Antony and Octavius. The scene as a whole runs counter to a main theme of the play, which contrasts Roman coldness and efficiency with Egyptian sensuality and revelry. For on the galley the Romans appear as imprudent and ready for drunken revelry as Antony. One irrelevance is piled upon another as Shakespeare goes on to show that Menas regards Pompey, who refuses his offer, as too stupid to deserve his support and therefore goes his own way.

Other episodes, though they have some relevance to the play, are presented as isolated details that are not clearly integrated into a line of action. When Ventidius decides not to pursue his victory over the Parthians lest he offend Antony (III.i), he provides a cynical commentary upon both Antony and Octavius and shows how the pettiness of leaders frustrates the virtues of their followers. But these points are better made by Enobarbus, who is himself given two scenes in which to lament his desertion of Antony and to die (IV.vi and IV.ix), when one would do. Shakespeare seems to have been interested in Ventidius as an example of political acumen and Enobarbus as a noble man involved in a subordinate tragedy of his own.

A more serious confusion appears in the treatment of Antony himself. The opening lines clearly establish him as involved in a tragic conflict between his duty as a military leader and his passion for Cleopatra:

PHILO. Nay, but this dotage of our general's  
O'erflows the measure. . .  
His captain's heart  
. . . reneges all temper,  
And is become the bellows and the fan  
To cool a gipsy's lust. (I.i.1-10)

Later Antony himself confirms the diagnosis:

These strong Egyptian fetters I must break,  
Or lose myself in dotage. (I.ii.113-114)

I must from this enchanting queen break off.  
Ten thousand harms, more than the ills I know,  
My idleness doth hatch. (I.ii.125-127)

And Antony does break off and goes to Rome, although not without confessing that his heart remains with Cleopatra (I.iii.104). Her role so far, and indeed until Antony's death, is like that of Lady Macbeth, a kind of dramatic antagonist bent upon luring her man to destruction. But with Antony's return from Egypt the tragic design so carefully developed in the opening scenes breaks down. This return is, in fact, the decisive action which destroys Antony and for which earlier scenes have prepared, again much as the early scenes in *Macbeth* focus the action upon the issue whether the hero will yield to the temptation to murder Duncan. But in the earlier play the decision to murder is elaborately developed, and the murder itself is marked by one comment after another as the end of Macbeth the brave warrior and self-controlled human being. In *Antony and Cleopatra* a Soothsayer warns Antony to "make space" between himself and Octavius (II.iii.22), and Antony comments:

I will to Egypt;  
And though I make this marriage for my peace,  
I' the east my pleasure lies. (II.iii.37-39)

An act and three scenes later (as modern editors arrange them), we learn from Octavius, as does Antony's wife Octavia, that he has returned to Egypt and his Egyptian dotage. This casual treatment is perhaps adequate for the story of Antony and Cleopatra but not for the tragedy of Mark Antony.

After Antony's death Cleopatra's role changes from that of a tragic antagonist to Antony to that of a tragic heroine in her own right. The historical account, of course, made it necessary that Cleopatra's death follow Antony's, but once again Shakespeare followed the story for its own sake without clarifying the relationship of Cleopatra's death to Antony's or providing her motives with the kind of interpretation that he usually granted to his tragic heroes.

Shakespeare's interest in relating a famous love story from history must also be responsible for the fragmentation of the play into numerous short episodes, too many of which merely provide the audience with an interesting detail from the source and do not really advance the dramatic action. Act III is perhaps the weakest in its proportion of purely expository scenes to those in which the action of the play moves forward. But these fragmentary scenes do provide the audience with maximum exposure to the source narrative.

In short, *Antony and Cleopatra*, though more compelling as a great love story than contemporary plays about Roman wars, and though written with all the magic of Shakespeare's poetry, is little better articulated in plot structure than they. If this seem heresy, the reader should consider the stage history of the play, at best spotty and lacking in performances as compared

with the tragedies from *Julius Caesar* to *Macbeth*. Or he should watch a performance of the play and ask himself seriously whether the difficulties lie in the production or in the play. For the play simply does not have the dramatic clarity and tension of the great tragedies. And we have no right to expect that it should.

In its failure to delineate Antony as a fully developed tragic hero or to present Antony and Cleopatra as joint tragic heroes (such as Romeo and Juliet), the play obviously reflects Shakespeare's compulsion to be faithful to a well-known story. The same failure to concentrate upon a single hero or a pair of heroes involved in a single tragedy was apparent, of course, in all the Roman plays discussed earlier, even Ben Jonson's *Catiline*, which in its point of view wobbles between Catiline and Cicero. But Jonson's play is, nevertheless, much better unified than the others, and it therefore illustrates the second principle to be discussed, namely, that even a relatively unified tragedy may not focus throughout upon a single tragic hero. Christopher Marlowe's *Edward II* is probably the greatest English history play not by Shakespeare, to whom it undoubtedly taught much (among other things, about shaping chronicle material into a unified tragedy), but once again the title is an accurate indication of its double focus: *The troublesome raigne and lamentable death of Edward the second, King of England: with the tragicall fall of proud Mortimer* (published 1594). Mortimer in fact dominates much of the play, which continues beyond the death of Edward to include his destruction by Edward's son. The same shifting of viewpoint occurs in John Fletcher's *Bonduca* (ca. 1613, published 1647), where it cannot be attributed to historical sources. The emphasis of the play wanders between Bonduca and Caratach, who are at times in moral opposition, and it very nearly subordinates the heroic death of Bonduca and her daughters by continuing to the pathetic end of Caratach's nephew Hengo and the former's surrender with honor. Examples could be multiplied.

*Julius Caesar* is probably a better unified play than any of the preceding, even *Catiline*; but, notwithstanding, it supports my thesis, that we dare not assume even a well-unified tragedy will result from concentration upon a single tragic hero. Discussing it will incidentally give me a chance partially to recant what I have written.<sup>4</sup> We can best understand *Julius Caesar*, at least from this point of view, if we compare it with an earlier play on Julius Caesar and with Shakespeare's own *Richard II*, which he and his contemporaries regarded as a tragedy.<sup>5</sup> *The Tragedie of Caesar and Pompey or Caesar's Revenge* (ca. 1595, published 1606) presents the entire story from the Battle of Pharsalia to the death of Brutus; it manages to include Caesar's refusal to kill Brutus, Caesar's love of Cleopatra (punctuated by amorous asides from Antony), the murder of Pompey, the suicide of Cato, and the main episodes of Shakespeare's play, except that Antony has no funeral oration and goads the people on to revenge in a scene that he shares with Octavius. Caesar's ghost is built up into a standard revenge ghost.



Shakespeare's structure is a great improvement. Shakespeare's action is the assassination of Caesar and its consequences. He begins with events that move—or are used by Cassius to move—Brutus to join the conspirators, and he continues to Brutus's death, which ends the consequences of that action. But it seems likely that even Shakespeare, at this point in his dramatic development, was not capable of rising completely above the habits of contemporary drama. We have noted the structure of Elizabethan tragedies as sometimes governed by the need to present a traditional block of history. *Caesar's Revenge* obviously attempts to do so. The story which Shakespeare knew was that of Caesar and Brutus.

Caesar's complicated personality and the circumstances of his death as presented by Plutarch must also have had for Shakespeare compelling fascination. In his immediately preceding tragedy he had combined, in effect, two stories: the life and coronation of Bolingbroke and the downfall and death of Richard II. These two actions were, of course, intimately related, and they could easily be managed in one drama, particularly if the death of Richard were reserved until after Bolingbroke had established himself by quelling a major conspiracy against him, and Richard's coffin were brought in as Bolingbroke settled accounts in the final scene. But the fact remains that Shakespeare, like his fellow playwrights, found adequate unity in a drama that had, in effect, two heroes. In *Julius Caesar*, though he condensed the action of the older play immeasurably, he kept something of the double focus of *Richard II*.

We can get a clearer notion of *Julius Caesar*, perhaps, if we create for it a title following a standard Elizabethan formula from Marlowe's *Edward II*: "The troublesome life and lamentable death of Julius Caesar with the tragicall fall of proud Brutus." To do this is simply to restate in dramatic terms the fact that *Julius Caesar* is closer in time to *Richard II*, in which the influence of Marlowe is strong, than to *Othello*, in which the tragical fall of the proud Moor furnishes the entire substance, as well as the basic action of the play. But, in dramatic structure as in time, we are far more than halfway from *Edward II* to *Othello*. Though Caesar receives great attention, Brutus does provide the basic action of *Julius Caesar* and gives the play genuine unity. Shakespeare has eliminated everything from the traditional story before the hatching of the conspiracy against Caesar, and important events involving Caesar occur offstage while we watch Cassius work upon Brutus before our eyes. Most important of all, however, Brutus has been developed into a tragic hero of the Aristotelian type, whose tragic flaw is his pride and whose tragic *hamartia* or error is his decision to join the conspiracy against Caesar. The concluding summaries of Antony and Octavius (V.v.68-81) concentrate properly upon the greatness and nobility that made him a hero, notwithstanding the death to which an understandable error led.

Shakespeare has also used the double heroes to enrich the meaning of his play. Caesar, like Brutus, is proud of his reputation for nobility. "What

touches us ourself shall be last served," he says, and to maintain this posture he dies. This kind of thematic doubling, as I have called it,<sup>6</sup> becomes one of Shakespeare's great devices for giving universality and depth to the moral exempla of his plays. For Julius Caesar is himself developed as a minor Aristotelian hero whose flaw leads to a tragic error and to death.

There are, however, a number of Elizabethan plays that, in contrast to *Julius Caesar*, are tightly unified about a simple tragic hero. But they lack the depth of characterization found in *Brutus* or even in *Julius Caesar*, and they lead to the third and last thesis to be proposed: namely, that, even granted a single tragic hero, we still cannot expect an Elizabethan protagonist, or even a Shakespearean protagonist, to have a definite tragic flaw which results in a tragic error.

Some of the best organized Elizabethan plays result from principles of organization logically implicit in the concept of Fortune's wheel, or the notion that pride goeth before a fall, or similar elements of treatments of the "fall of princes" deriving ultimately from Boccaccio's *De Casibus Virorum Illustrium* and culminating, for Elizabethans, in *A Myrroure for Magistrates*. Marlowe's *Tamburlaine* (2 parts, ca. 1588, 1589, published 1590), Shakespeare's *Richard III* (ca. 1593, published 1597) and *Timon of Athens* (ca. 1607, published 1623), Jonson's *Sejanus his Fall* (1605), Chapman's *Bussy D'Ambois* (ca. 1604, published 1607) and his two-part *The Conspiracie and Tragedie of Charles Duke of Byron* (published 1608) all illustrate a plot unified about one hero, whose rise and fall are narrated.

But even these plays exemplify no concept of a tragic hero except that he must be of such exalted rank that his fall (or in *Tamburlaine* failure to fall) can have widespread consequences. He may be, like the Jew of Malta, Richard III, or Sejanus, a thoroughly evil person with no redeeming quality except his "virtu." He may be, like Chapman's Bussy D'Ambois or Byron, a potentially good man who falls into evil but whose fall is not developed dramatically with anything like the care that Shakespeare bestows upon his great tragic heroes. It is also significant that only four dramatists are represented among the plays mentioned, and they are all among the greatest of the age. Elizabethan playwrights found structure difficult, and only the ablest achieved structure of any kind.

All Shakespeare's tragedies show a concern with dramatic structure that places even his earliest on a level with the plays just mentioned. But his greatest tragedies—*Othello*, *Lear*, *Macbeth*, and even *Coriolanus*—rise above these to the level described by Aristotle as characteristic of the greatest tragedy. Centering upon a single tragic hero produces a plot with a genuine beginning, middle, and end, and a hero who is "in high station and good fortune" but falls through "some great flaw in the character" or error of judgment. (Aristotle's word 'hamartia' means etymologically 'missing the mark' and is probably better translated as 'error in judgment' than 'flaw';



it becomes the New Testament term for sin. But both concepts, tragic flaw and tragic error, are part of the tradition of Shakespearean criticism.)

An attempt to find a similar tragic flaw in Hamlet produced in the nineteenth century the theorizing so well summarized—and developed—in A. C. Bradley's lectures on *Hamlet* in his *Shakespearean Tragedy*, which continues up to our own day, most recently in Eleanor Prosser's *Hamlet and Revenge*.<sup>7</sup> But *Hamlet* is in origin a revenge tragedy, and extant plays in the genre from *The Spanish Tragedy* on down derive their unity and their structure from providing the hero with an incentive to revenge and barriers to overcome in achieving vengeance, rather than from any tragic flaw in the hero, despite the self-castigation for delay that they contain.

Unfortunately for the present argument, perhaps, the closest approach to an Aristotelian tragic hero in the revenge tragedies is probably Titus Andronicus, whose stubborn self-righteousness leads to a genuine tragic error in the horrible sacrifice of Tamora's son Alarbus and brings on the savage cruelty which he must ultimately revenge. But Titus's moral flaw is not central to the main revenge action, and Shakespeare's play, like the others, derives its unity of structure from a patterning of events rather than from character in action. The same may be true of *Hamlet*; Shakespeare, for once, may be of his age as well as for all time.

Once again the final lines of the play are a clue to Shakespeare's intention. Horatio summarizes swiftly but in exact order the key events of the play, emphasizing its exciting chain of episodes. Fortinbras claims the kingdom but makes no promises like Malcolm's in *Macbeth*, and then gives orders for proper treatment of Hamlet's body, "For he was likely/ . . . To have proved most royal" (V.2.395-396). The emphasis, as in *Antony and Cleopatra*, is upon the story; there is no final characterization of Hamlet like that of Brutus or of Othello, no restoration of order as in *Othello*, *Macbeth*, or *Lear*, no indication as in *King Lear*, who has been stretched upon the rack of this tough world, that the play is about cosmic and social disorder as well as human sin and human suffering. The play is about the troublesome life and tragical death of Hamlet, Prince of Denmark.

Much of that troubled life has been devoted to lamenting the trials produced by the sins of others, particularly his mother, and by the frustrations of feeling unable to revenge his father. But the plot is almost always contrived so that Hamlet cannot act, and his inability to chart his course is a tragic flaw only in so far as man's imperfect understanding and his frustrating inability to control his own life are themselves a tragic flaw. One could argue, in fact, that they are the ultimate tragic weaknesses of all humanity and that, in this respect, *Hamlet* is, along with *King Lear*, an exploration of the ultimate tragedy of human life. But that is not what the concept of a tragic flaw, as used by critics of *Hamlet*, has denoted; and I certainly do not propose to try a radical new approach so late in this essay.

What has confused interpreters of Hamlet is the tremendous amount of meditation written into the play. If Hamlet the prince is the center of the play, surely the soliloquies are central to his enigmatic character. They are the sort of taking stock of his problems that ought to lead to, and motivate, decisive actions, as do similar soliloquies in *Macbeth*. But the only meditation leading to a clear resolve is that over the king at prayer. Here the decision is *not* to act rather than to act; it is, furthermore, sound, granted Hamlet's determination that revenge must be for all eternity, for Hamlet cannot know that Claudius is failing to make his peace with God. It is a little hard under any code of ethics to see a decision not to kill in cold blood as a tragic error. The killing of Polonius in hot blood, in contrast, is certainly an error and a sin, but, for all its importance, it is hard to see it either as central to the action or as resulting from Hamlet's continuous introspection. A. C. Bradley and E. E. Stoll have demolished on other grounds the old theory that *Hamlet* is a tragedy of excessive thoughtfulness; and, although one or two passages can be cited to support the view, Hamlet's meditations simply do not lead to a tragic error, as do the flaws carefully developed in Brutus, or Macbeth, or King Lear.

Professor Prosser, in arguing that the inclination to revenge is itself sinful, makes a considerably better case for an erring Hamlet up through the killing of Polonius, and Professor Fredson Bowers produced and then refined another interesting new theory some years ago in his series of essays on Hamlet as "scourge and minister."<sup>8</sup> But Prosser is not altogether successful in explaining what happens after the Closet scene, and Bowers's explanation, in assuming that Hamlet was bound to await his chance for a public act of justice, surely went beyond the text of the play.

Hamlet's meditations are in line with the tremendous load of ethical (and dramatic) commentary imposed upon the play. Sin and evil in man seem to have interested Shakespeare profoundly and moved his deepest emotions; so did the problem of restoring man (and woman) to moral integrity, if one may judge by his careful use of Anglican teaching on the nature of repentance in Claudius's prayer (III.iii.36-72) and (in a morally ambiguous way) in Hamlet's preparation for the fencing match (V.ii.224-242), or by Hamlet's summary of a whole body of related doctrine as he lectures Gertrude on abstaining from sin (III.iv.139-173). And the Hamlet described by Bowers,<sup>9</sup> among others, who resigns himself to the will of God in some passages late in the play (cf. V.ii.48, 217-220), reflects this line of thought with some damage to the integrity of the play, for he is at an opposite pole from the revenger Hamlet who resolves on bloody thoughts (IV.iv.66) or sends Rosencrantz and Guildenstern, whose only crime is that their "baser natures" have come between "mighty opposites," to their death, "not shriving-time allowed" (V.ii.60-62, 47). Furthermore, Hamlet's request that Laertes forgive him is apparently based on a lie, for his excuse of madness (V.ii.230) certainly contradicts his assurance to Gertrude during the Closet scene that he is not

mad (cf. III.iv.140-145). Shakespeare has failed to provide a consistent motivation for Hamlet's actions.

In these concerns with human sin and human morality, *Hamlet* resembles, and in some ways even surpasses, the other great tragedies of Shakespeare's maturity. But Shakespeare apparently could not—at least, he did not—refashion the hero of his revenge-play source into the fully developed Aristotelian hero of the other tragedies. Considering what he did with that source, we have no right to ask for what he did not do. It was possible in *Hamlet* for him to be for all time even while being of his age.

### NOTES

1. References to *Antony and Cleopatra* and to *Julius Caesar* are to the Arden Shakespeare: *Antony and Cleopatra*, ed. M. R. Ridley (London, 1954); *Julius Caesar*, ed. T. S. Dorsch (London, 1955). See also *Hamlet*, ed. John Dover Wilson (Cambridge, 1934).

2. *An Apology for Actors* (London, 1612), Bk. III, sig. F1<sup>v</sup>.

3. *The Mirror up to Nature* (San Marino, Calif., 1965). See Ch. I for an analysis of Elizabethan tragedies, Ch. II for critical theory, and cf. p. 92. This essay, in attempting a critical application of summaries of Elizabethan drama contained in the work, occasionally borrows or paraphrases sentences from it.

4. *Shakespeare's Use of Learning* (San Marino, Calif., 1953), pp. 236-238.

5. Cf. *The Mirror up to Nature*, pp. 11, 14-16.

6. "In Search of Shakespeare's Journal," *Studies in English Literature, 1500-1900*, 5 (1965), 304, 306-307.

7. Eleanor Prosser, *Hamlet and Revenge* (Stanford, Calif., 1967).

8. Fredson Bowers, "Hamlet as Minister and Scourge," *PMLA*, 70 (1955), 740-749; "The Death of Hamlet: A Study in Plot and Character," *Studies in the English Renaissance Drama*, ed. Josephine W. Bennett et al. (New York, 1959), pp. 28-42; "Dramatic Structure and Criticism: Plot in 'Hamlet,'" *SQ* 15 (Spring, 1964), 207-218. The last named discusses both the meditative Hamlet and the attempt to make his failure to kill the king at prayer the climax of the play.

9. Cf. Bowers, "Dramatic Structure and Criticism: Plot in 'Hamlet,'" 217-218.